

THE ROANOKE TIMES

MAY 17, 2023

Cafe denial vexes entrepreneurs

By Molly Hunter

It remains unclear why, if a Roanoke City Council majority wasn't going to support the sale of 1.1 acres of park land, it voted to set up a contract to do just that.

In December – more than half a year after Justin and Keri vanBlaricom began working with the city on their dream to turn the long-neglected Fishburn Park caretaker's cottage into the Fishburn Perk cafe – the council voted 6-1 to approve a contract outlining what they'd need to do to make it happen.

The contract established a process that, as long as the vanBlaricoms met its stipulations and worked in good faith, the city would sell them the 1.1 acres of park land – including the house – for \$10. The vanBlaricoms spent a year and roughly \$15,000 under that premise, they say. Under the agreement, they were going to spend much more to renovate the house and create what they believed would be a successful business that would add to the park.

But Monday's vote on the vanBlaricoms' rezoning application – the final step to owning the property as outlined in the contract – wasn't even close to an approval. The council denied the application 6-1 – Vice Mayor Joe Cobb was the lone vote in favor – with very little explanation from Mayor Sherman Lea and council members Vivian Sanchez-Jones and Trish White-Boyd, who approved the contract in December. Stephanie Moon Reynolds voted against the contract in December, Cobb voted for it and Peter Volosin and Luke Priddy were not on council at the time.

Justin vanBlaricom said Monday's vote caught him flat-footed. He and his family members weren't the only ones taken by surprise, as evidenced by confused reactions from Priddy, Cobb and various city staff members.

From the start of his council term in January, Priddy has been up front about his opposition to selling public park land in general, and he reiterated that conviction Monday evening.

Council members Stephanie Moon Reynolds and Peter Volosin asked several questions, but didn't give any hint as to how they planned to vote.

Lea said he wanted to see a business plan. Justin vanBlaricom said no city council or city staff members asked him to provide one, and it wasn't part of the contract.

There was a letter from the Parks and Recreation Board asking for a business plan, but the board does not have purview over business proposals submitted to the department of economic development or zoning matters.

Sanchez-Jones and White-Boyd did not respond to The Roanoke Times' Tuesday requests to explain the reasoning behind their Monday votes.

Volosin, however, said he would have approved Fishburn Perk if it was a leasehold agreement instead of a sale of park land.

Moon Reynolds told The Roanoke Times she supports the vanBlaricoms and that she would vote for the proposal if it used less land.

“Before signing the contract – that was the time to talk about the amount of land or anything else that the city needed. ... What they did put in there was that it had to be rezoned MXPUD and we put in all these restrictions as to use. We have been, in good faith, operating off of that contract,” Justin vanBlaricom said.

And, he said, the council made sure they wouldn’t have time to adjust their application when they denied them a six-month deadline extension earlier in 2023.

Justin vanBlaricom said he’d appreciate it if someone would tell him when he’s wasting his time.

“I do want to know if they agreed to it and signed a contract with no intention of executing that contract. It wastes me a lot of money and time,” Justin vanBlaricom said.

Cobb said he worries about the message the council sends by pulling the rug out from under the vanBlaricoms.

Lea said he doesn’t believe council’s decision will affect the number of entrepreneurs who try to start businesses in Roanoke, but Justin vanBlaricom indicated otherwise.

“Other entrepreneurs in the valley are watching this happen and are saying, ‘Oh, I should go to the county.’ Or, ‘I should go to Salem.’ Which is sad for our city,” Justin vanBlaricom said.

THE ROANOKE TIMES

JUNE 19, 2023

Trust lacking in Evans Spring

By Molly Hunter

As Roanoke city officials and consultants work toward a master plan for Evans Spring, residents in the surrounding neighborhoods are bracing for the same kind of upheaval they say was experienced under urban renewal.

Stephen Niamke, president of the Melrose-Rugby Neighborhood Forum, said he believes Evans Spring is at the center of the most important decision city council will make this century.

“It’s about the type of relationship the government wants to have with the community, particularly the African American community. If the community is violated again, I don’t believe the city will ever recover from that — at least not in our lifetime,” Niamke said.

One of the first pages of Roanoke’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan names trust as a top priority.

“While overtly discriminatory policies of the past have largely been removed, there is still a responsibility for City government and its current leadership to regain trust following the trauma experienced by

African American communities,” the 2040 plan says. “For the community to thrive as a whole, the City government must work to build trust through its actions.”

When the city began seizing, bulldozing and removing Roanoke’s Black communities in the 1950’s in the name of urban renewal, the people fled to Gainsboro and other surrounding neighborhoods. The city’s urban renewal projects followed them there, uprooting some of the same families again.

Now, many of the same people, their relatives and their friends live and own property in the neighborhoods bordering Evans Spring.

At roughly 150 acres, Evans Spring is the largest undeveloped piece of land remaining in the city. It contains wetlands, lies in a floodplain and is located near the top of the Lick Run Watershed. It’s located on the side of Interstate 581 opposite Valley View Mall, and flanked by the Melrose-Rugby, Fairland and Washington Park neighborhoods.

The city recently brought consultants on board to create a plan that will guide the future of Evans Spring. They are on the 7 p.m. Tuesday, June 20, city council agenda to give an update on the planning process.

It doesn’t take a rocket scientist, Carolyn Hubbard said, to look at what the city has done in the past and figure out what they’re doing now. Hubbard doesn’t live in the Evans Spring area, but her family and church were displaced by urban renewal.

She and others see the city’s current attempt to develop an Evans Spring Master Plan as a sign of another displacement.

“My mother almost had a nervous breakdown. There were people that had heart attacks. There were people that had strokes. And then there were people that just died from heartbreak. That’s why the people in the Evans Spring area now don’t trust the city — because they know the families or people that they grew up with ... who survived,” Hubbard said.

In a May 25 email to The Roanoke Times, City Manager Bob Cowell wrote that the master plan will not be a development proposal.

Master plans are commonly a precursor to development, though, used to attract developers with the promise of community consensus about future acceptable uses for an area.

At a March 9 community engagement workshop to gather input for the Evans Spring Master Plan, roughly 125 people said the same thing: Do not develop Evans Spring.

After The Roanoke Times asked if no development is on the table, city Communications & Community Engagement Specialist Carol Corbin sent a June 9 email, containing a response from Cowell referencing the 2013 Evans Spring Area Plan and 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

Those plans propose a street connecting the Evans Spring area to Valley View Boulevard. They suggest commercial/mixed use on the side of Lick Run Creek closest to I-581, residential use on the other side of the creek and preservation along the creek and Fairland Lake.

Those plans contradict the wishes of nearby residents, going back at least a decade.

Community members pushed back in 2012 during the development of the 2013 Evans Spring Area Plan, and again in 2019 when the Pavilion development company submitted plans to turn the area into an extension of Valley View Mall — exactly the kind of the future residents worried about in 2012.

Niamke said Melrose-Rugby has taken a formal stance to oppose any “inappropriate development” of Evans Spring.

The neighborhoods bordering Evans Spring are defined by a network of narrow, winding roads built on steep drop-offs. They were not built to handle traffic and could not be widened easily.

Joann Hayden — another Roanoker with ties to those wronged by urban renewal — believes a street connecting Evans Spring to Valley View Boulevard would flood the area with traffic.

“People are definitely going to take a shortcut if they don’t have to go down Hershberger or go to Orange Avenue,” Hayden said.

There’s also the question of what would happen to the water and wildlife occupying Evans Spring. Hayden said she recently saw an egret at Fairland Lake.

“All the deer and other little animals that live over there, the squirrels — I don’t know where they would go if they were to start developing that area,” Hayden said.

Meanwhile, Debra Carter — a member of the Friends of Evans Spring group that began meeting in March to oppose development — said the area may be home to an imperiled species of salamander.

Community members at the March 9 meeting also worried about the impact of Evans Spring development on flooding in downtown Roanoke.

A few years ago, a Virginia Tech research team simulated the impact of Evans Spring development on downtown flooding. The simulation results, detailed in a 2019 report, indicated that Evans Spring development wouldn’t exacerbate flooding in downtown Roanoke.

Those simulations did not, however, look at how development could impact flooding in the Melrose-Rugby, Washington Park and Harrison neighborhoods, which are located in the Lick Run watershed directly downstream of Evans Spring. The simulations also didn’t investigate development’s impact on water quality or local wildlife.

Members of the same team that did the 2019 simulations created the city’s 2017 Lick Run Watershed Master Plan. According to the 2017 plan, “the economic and ecological benefit of preservation is likely to outweigh the cost of restoration and flood mitigation if this land is developed.”

The 2017 plan recommended that the city purchase the Evans Spring land to preserve it in its undeveloped, natural state.

Meanwhile, almost all of Evans Spring lies within a city River and Creek Corridors Overlay District.

According to city code, the regulations on those districts are designed to ensure practices that protect soil and water quality while preventing and minimizing activities that could endanger water resources.

Natural green spaces like Evans Spring also help combat heat islands. Addressing heat islands with greenery is one the strategies outlined in the city’s recently-released Climate Action Plan draft.

Leaving Evans Spring as-is would do more to mitigate heat than any development option would, preserving the natural land as an oasis in Northwest Roanoke — currently home to many of the city’s heat islands — while also alleviating residents’ concerns about commercial development ruining the quality of life, according to some involved.

“The city is putting out these wonderful messages about their values and protecting the environment and all of that. We just want them to be true to that, because if they’re true to that, then they’ll hear what we’re saying,” Niamke said.

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Not wasting time

By Molly Hunter

These days, it’s difficult to drive a mile without spotting a van or heavy truck sporting a bumper sticker requesting applicants with a commercial driver’s license.

Members of the city of Roanoke’s solid waste management department — for many of whom a CDL is a job requirement — know what that means and they work they do, and they have been hearing about future raises for more than a year. And they say they are still waiting.

John Brown, a city garbage truck operator, was part of a group of city solid waste employees who attended the Jan. 17 Roanoke City Council meeting — not something that happens often. Brown spoke on behalf of that group, requesting wage increases.

Roanoke has 55 solid waste management positions. City Manager Bob Cowell said seven of the city solid waste positions are vacant and five of the vacancies are for garbage truck operators. The city has about eight more operators through a temp agency, but they are not considered city employees.

Right now, city employees told The Roanoke Times, those at the bottom of the city’s operator pay grade make roughly \$15.36 an hour. In Roanoke County, it’s about \$20. It’s \$16.35 in Salem, \$20 in Lynchburg and \$18.35 in Norfolk.

“When we started complaining about it, they had to do a compensation study. They said it would take six to eight months to compile the data, which they did. Then they said, ‘We’re still going through the budget. We’re going to see what we can do.’ Then city council members came over, talked to all of us at public works, said, ‘You’re priority number one.’ We’re tired of promises. All I want you to tell me is what date you’re going to have my money on my paycheck,” Paul Shull, one of the city’s four solid waste collections inspectors, told The Roanoke Times in a recent interview.

Over time, the city’s solid waste management employees have become victims of wage compression: starting wages have gone up over time, but the pay for existing employees has not kept pace. For

example, one longtime city employee — who, like some of their other colleagues, did not wish to be named for fear of retribution from the city — makes only 40 cents more per hour than the starting wage for their position.

After Brown spoke at the Jan. 17 meeting, Deputy City Manager Clarence Grier followed him and the others into the lobby outside of the council room. The Roanoke Times was present when Grier promised to meet with them on Jan. 24. All of them, Brown asked? Yes, Grier said.

When the time came for that meeting, though, only some — garbage truck operators, specifically — were permitted entrance. Collections inspectors were not allowed to participate.

“In the past, solid waste has been a team. ... When storm events happened, solid waste has been expected to keep the city clean and keep it moving — wind storms, blizzards, hundred year floods. ... Now we have been divided,” Shull said.

The operator and collections inspector jobs both require CDLs. While the operators drive garbage trucks along specific trash collection routes, the collections inspectors patrol the city, making sure the routes are safe to drive and ensuring refuse is being collected. Collections inspectors also operate garbage trucks when there are absences or vacancies.

At the Jan. 24 meeting, city administrators told the operators they would receive pay raises starting in February, retroactive to the first of the year. Depending on tenure, responsibilities and experience, their hourly wages may go up between \$3 and \$7.

The collections inspectors may see raises when fiscal year 2024 starts on July 1, 2023, but it’s unclear what those possible raises will be and whether they will also be retroactive to Jan. 1, 2023.

And there’s still the question of what will happen with the other solid waste employees — administrators, supervisors and the like.

“Solid waste is solid waste as a whole. We all pick up garbage,” Shull said.

Cowell said the city wants to pay everyone more and that doing so has been a goal for the last two years.

The city started raising public safety pay a couple of years ago. In July, the public safety department — which includes fire, EMS and police — will complete the move to a new pay structure, a transition which has taken place gradually over three years because of the cost involved. Also in July, Cowell said, the city plans to start transitioning all of the other departments to new pay structures.

Cowell said the city tackled public safety first because of staffing issues in that department. He added that, in 2022, the other departments received cost of living raises and the \$15 minimum wage increase.

The solid waste employees who spoke to The Roanoke Times indicated the minimum wage increase mostly benefited trash collectors who ride on the back of the truck and are not required to have a CDL.

As for prioritizing public safety, numerous solid waste employees have said the same thing, summed up by one this way: “The solid waste department is the only department in the city that touches every single house in the city once a week. PD [the police department] doesn’t do that, rescue doesn’t do that, parks and rec doesn’t — nobody does that. We do.”

The raises that may happen in July will be informed by a compensation study completed last year. In October, Gallagher Human Resources & Compensation Consulting wrapped up the \$125,000 study for the city that proposed two new pay structure options for city departments other than public safety.

One option, Cowell said, is to meet the market; the other is to lead it. Meeting the market could cost between \$2 million and \$5.5 million, he said, while leading it could cost between \$3.5 million and \$15 million.

He said the city is still weighing its options, trying to decide whether to meet the market, lead it or pursue a hybrid of the two.

City officials are already feeling some sense of urgency to increase pay, though, and were even before the solid waste employees' appearance at the Jan. 17 council meeting. Last year, the city set aside \$500,000 in the current budget to give some non-public safety positions raises earlier than July.

Cowell said the city plans to publicly announce Monday exactly which positions will get the early raises, but he confirmed Wednesday that city garbage truck operators will be definitely be among them — hence the February raises city management told the operators to expect Tuesday.

Still unknown is the plan for the rest of solid waste, not to mention employees in other city departments. Cowell said the specifics will be hashed out over the next few months as the city develops its budget for fiscal year 2024.

“That will be, really, determined by the answer to some of those questions about the kind of turn over, the kind of challenges and the money available,” Cowell said.

Employees may know more by late spring, since the city council has until then to approve the fiscal year 2024 budget and the first step toward a new pay structure.